SPRING AT LAST! A GUIDE TO EATING IN A SEASON MOST FLEETING

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By Sam Mellins

There’s a better way to know if spring is coming than observing Punxsutawney Phil’s

shadow: watching the produce aisle at the Park Slope Food Coop.

When local green garlic and winter spinach appear on the shelves, it's a sure sign that the season is turning, according to produce buyer Cecelia Rembert.

"That's one of the signals of spring—the spinach is here," she says.

In the chilly northeast, most vegetables won't appear for several weeks after that, at least. But green garlic, which is harvested before the bulb forms underground, and winter spinach, which has been bred to withstand frigid temperatures and snow, can be ready at the first sign of warmth. Mâche, a loose salad green, is also one of the first crops of the season, beating full heads of lettuce by months.

Another of the earliest spring arrivals is purely decorative: the pussywillow, says Elise Gilchrist, of the distributor Myers Produce. These early bloomers, which Myers Produce buys from Old Friends Farm in Amherst, Massachusetts, are an important kickstarter for pollinators in the wild, telling the bees that it's time to get going. In the home, they can serve as understated decoration.

Though they're not local, other fruits like mangoes also signal the new season. The mango harvest in Mexico starts in February and runs through August, with supply becoming plentiful as the weather warms.

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The Coop once stocked Haitian mangoes, generating great excitement among shoppers, Rembert said. But recently, political instability in the country has prevented USDA inspectors from accessing the farms there, which has shut US retailers out of importing the crop.

The end of winter also means the end of citrus season in California, the source of most of the Coop's oranges. (Florida's orange groves have never recovered from a brutal blight in the early 2000s.) The last trees are picked in February, so by March and April, any remaining stock is coming out of storage.

Even for products that can be grown locally, the cornucopia of temperate California can beat northeastern crops to the market. California asparagus generally arrives before the local kind, for example.

And California's farms can scratch itches that ours can't. Rembert eagerly awaits the arrival of fuzzy, unripe green almonds in April, she said.

It can be tempting to grab local green as soon as it arrives—and certainly deserved after a winter as harsh as this one. But there can also be good reasons to wait.

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When the spring produce first arrives, the prices are generally on the higher side, since only a small portion of the harvest is available. Farmers will race to see who can harvest earliest, and thus command the highest price for their momentarily rare commodities. As spring wears on and the rest of the crop arrives, prices fall. Paradoxically, quality also improves, since the produce has had more time to ripen in the field.

At the end of a crop's season, prices will rise as it becomes scarce again. But then, pickings are slimmer and quality is less certain.

Gilchrist suggests that Coop shoppers keep an eye out for spring parsnips. Most parsnips are harvested in the fall and winter. But spring parsnips spend all winter in the

soil, where the cold and frost makes them extra sweet and less bitter.

“Spring is short, and it’s a really unique moment to grab parsnips that will taste different than at any other time of the year,” Gilchrist said.

Don’t wait to grab them. Like many spring crops, their season is fleeting.

Sam Mellins is a New York City native and nationalist, Brooklyn transplant, local reporter, Coop member since 2024 and fresh fig enthusiast.